

Economics Legislation Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Industry Portfolio
Budget Estimates 2014-15
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AGENCY/DEPARTMENT: DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRY

TOPIC: Hospital Produced Radioactive Waste

REFERENCE: Question on Notice (Hansard, 3 June 2014, page 40)

QUESTION No.: BI-66

Mr Sheldrick: Australia does not generate high-level radioactive waste from any of its activities. I could classify it into two different streams of waste. There is the waste that comes out of the hospitals. I have been to facilities and seen some of this waste, and a lot of the time it is literally the gloves and gowns that are worn by the medical practitioners. So there is the waste that comes out of the use of the material but there is also waste that is generated in Australia by the development of some of the medicines and so on, and that is slightly different.

CHAIR: So that is a second category.

Mr Sheldrick: Yes.

CHAIR: Is that like spent fuel, in a sense, or is it something lower than that?

Mr Sheldrick: I like to make the distinction between spent fuel and waste. Spent fuel is not necessarily waste. As you may know, Australia has spent fuel which we send overseas for reprocessing. What we get back is waste. The spent fuel often has material in it that is still useful.

CHAIR: In terms of the need to store this material, the bulk of it by size, I would imagine, would be your used gloves, clothing and things like that, rather than the other category that you mentioned?

Mr Sheldrick: Volume-wise, there are various forms of waste that are currently held in Australia. Some of it is from the decommissioning of previous reactors. We have about 4,000 cubic metres of low-level waste. I would have to take on notice the percentage of that that is hospital produced waste.

ANSWER

Low and intermediate level waste arises from the production of medical isotopes at the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO). Volumetrically, around 90 per cent of the radioactive waste produced at ANSTO, including gloves, gowns and related reactor operations, can be attributed to medical isotope production. Operational waste held at ANSTO accounts for 44.9 per cent of current low level waste inventories.

Today, most hospital produced radioactive waste, which is subject to regulatory oversight by the States and Territories, is managed via storage decay and as such does not contribute significantly to Australia's low-level waste inventory. However, there are a number of legacy sources as well as sources used in a small number of medical procedures that require long-term storage or disposal in a suitable facility. These sources are currently stored at hospitals across Australia awaiting transfer to the National Radioactive Waste Management Facility once operational.